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AUTHOR Vaughan, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

An early childhood classroom teacher integrated academic goals with the acquisition of social skills by using a specific teaching strategy of co-operative learning. The teacher of 5- to 7-year-olds experienced a classroom environment which lacked respect, fairness, and tolerance in the following dynamics: (1) boys toward girls; (2) older children toward younger children; (3) more academically able toward less academically able; and (4) boys toward teachers and adults. The goal of the cooperative learning program was to implement explicit academic and social skill expectations whereby children are positively interdependent, feedback is constructive in manner, and reflection is encouraged utilizing a detailed eight-step, progressive methodology. The implementation of this approach resulted in four commonly encountered problems described in the literature of this subject--passive uninvolvement, active uninvolvement, independence, and taking charge. A fifth unanticipated problem, parent resistance, was addressed via a parent informational workshop. The other problems required modification of the methodology. The use of cooperative learning in this classroom resulted in positive outcomes in the areas of cooperation and collaboration, decrease in competitive behavior, improvement in communication skills, increase in tolerance and respect, growth of self esteem, and a more productive classroom. (SD)

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VENTURING INTO CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS OF SCHOOLING - A CLASSROOM TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

Rebecca Vaughan

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Early childhood educators speak in terms of the development of the whole child and one in which the development of social skills is of fundamental importance if the child is to function successfully in the school community. Curriculum guidelines give lists of social skills that children are expected to master i.e. "the child is able to co-operate as a group member and share information, opinions and roles", "the child is able to listen well and be tolerant of and receptive to others opinions and ideas", "the child is able to resolve conflicts in a positive way". All too often early childhood educators have been expected to achieve these objectives but without any provision of a specific teaching strategy. The acquisition of social skills has tended to be viewed as something that will occur naturally if children are in a social situation and associating with other children. There are , however, many social skills that can and need to be taught and this can be done successfully by using co-operative learning as the teaching strategy.

Introduction

Early childhood educators speak in terms of the development of the whole child and one in which the development of social skills is of fundamental importance if the child is to function successfully in the school community. Curriculum guidelines such as the Tasmanian Department of Education and the Arts "Frameworks" (1993) give lists of social skills that children are expected to master i.e. "the child is able to co-operate as a group member and share information, opinions and roles", "the child is able to listen well and be tolerant of and receptive to others opinions and ideas", "the child is able to resolve conflicts in a positive way". All too often early childhood educators have been expected to achieve these objectives but without any provision of a specific teaching strategy. The acquisition of social skills has tended to be viewed as something that will occur naturally if children are in a social situation and associating with other children. There are , however, many social skills that can and need to be taught and this can be done successfully by using co-operative learning as the teaching strategy.

Objective

The objective in presenting this paper is to share the results of classroom practice and to discuss the outcomes of using co-operative teaching/learning strategy in my classroom. In presenting the paper I want to share with you the reasons why I implemented the strategy into my teaching programme, how I proceeded to implement it, the problems I encountered and ultimately the experience of success after putting the theory (albeit modified) into practice.

Discussion

Background

I came upon co-operative learning by chance. The school in which I am working has ,as a priority, Studies of Society and the Environment. During a course of professional development it was emphasised that the underpinning values of Studies of Society and Environment were those of the democratic process, social justice and ecological sustainability. Interpreted broadly these are the values that are central to the concept of citizenship be it citizenship of a school, a street, a suburb, a nation or the world. It was the value of social justice which struck a chord with me. The Australian Statement for Studies of Society and the Environment (1994) states that social justice

> *includes values such as concern for the welfare, rights and dignity of all people; empathy with people of different cultures and societies; fairness; and commitment to redressing disadvantage and to changing discriminatory and violent practices...*(p.5)

Values such as these require the social skills of tolerance, empathy, respect, concern. Co-operative learning is a teaching strategy that is used to teach both an academic skill and a social skill at the same time. At the time I made the decision to attempt to use co-operative learning the class composition was one in which the values of respect, fairness and tolerance were noticeably underdeveloped. The lack of respect, fairness and tolerance was:

* gender (boys for girls)
* age (older for younger)
* academic ability (the more able and more articulate for the less able and the less articulate
* authority (boys for teachers and adults)

The classroom situation was such that a group of boys persistently dominated and disrupted the class programme. On their part there was no sense that their behaviour was unfair to the other children. The decision to implement co-operative was the outcome of my frustration to elucidate the nature of the dynamics of the group. Every attempt had been made to discover what the past school experiences had been. My objective was refocus their attention from themselves to other children in the class and to work in a way that was fair to all children

especially in relation to using the resources (human, time, equipment) for, at least, part of the day.

In setting out there were two reservations that had to be considered. The first was related to Piaget's theory that the children with whom I was working were aged between five and seven and thus fell into the category of the pre-operational and the early concrete operational stages of cognitive development - the implication being that children in these stages were considered "egocentric" i.e. children see things through their own perspective and do not realise that there are other possible ways of viewing things. In attempting to put the strategy of co-operative learning into place the question had to be asked was it realistic to think that children aged between five and seven could be taught to stand back from their own situation, to reflect and be accountable for their behaviour and its effect on others in a group setting.
The second reservation that had to be considered was whether or not it was it was going to be possible to effect any change in the nature of the peer associations in particular among the boys. The children in the class had been together for a long period of time - not only in the school setting of kindergarten through to prep and grade one but also in child-care situations before the formal entry into school. Some children continue to spend considerable amounts of time in child-care - before and after school as well as during school vacations. When the question of child-care experience was examined an insight was gained from a report from the Australian Institute of Family Studies entitled "Today's Child Care, Tomorrow's Children!". The report shed some light on the concept of compliance in the school setting in relation to children, and particularly boys, who'd spent time in non-parental child care as infants.
Compliance for teachers is usually defined in terms of social skills and outcomes such as "is not disruptive", "is accepted by his peers", "is willing to share", "will wait his turn", "shows concern for other children", "is able to cope with change", "does not make undue demands on the teacher", "is settled and approaches tasks positively and completes them" etc. etc.
The report by Ochiltree & Edgar (1995) found that

> *A number of these items are ones for which boys, as a rule, tend to display more 'negative ' behaviour than girls: for example, boys are usually more disruptive and demanding in class than girls, are generally less patient, are less likely to show concern for the distress of others and are more likely to be so active that they could be rated as overactive. Furthermore, children who have had considerable experience in child care are accustomed to being in groups with other children and may be more boisterous or less accepting of group rules of behaviour than children who have had little experience. Such children are more independent, more likely to question authority and more gregarious ...(p.60)*

Defining Co-operative Learning

It is perhaps easier to say what co-operative learning is not.
Co-operative learning is NOT:
* sitting children in a small group, assuming and hoping they will co-operate
* having one person do the group's work
* sharing materials whilst working on individual tasks
* simply having children talk to teach other while doing their own work.

Hill & Hill (1990) define a co-operative activity as one in which two or more people are working towards the same goal and one in which members of the group know that they can only succeed if they work together.
An essential element in any co-operative activity is positive interdependence. This positive interdependence can be enhanced and achieved by structuring the task for a common purpose, by the distribution of resources to be used, by the assignation of roles, by sequencing tasks, and by structuring the physical environment. Given the structure and the view that group members can only succeed if they work together the next step to achieve this learning situation

is to programme activities in which
* the task (academic) and the skill (social) are made explicit
* practice is provided in a situation where the participants are positively interdependent and in which there is the expectation that the activity will be completed and reported on
* feedback will be given by either an individual, the group or the class in a constructive and non-threatening manner
* reflection is encouraged since this is the basis for improvement and modification in the next practice session.

The teacher's role is to make decisions before the lesson begins, set the lesson, monitor and intervene during group work and evaluate the product and process of the group work. Bennett, Rolheiser-Bennett & Stevahn (1991) in their book *Co-operative Learning: Where Heart Meets Mind* provide a detailed account of the teacher's role.

Implementing Co-operative Learning

Step 1. Building a supportive classroom environment.
This required retracing my steps and refocussing on the class rules and particularly on the the rule "CARE" - caring for each other. What constituted care within the classroom was made explicit. The class came to the position that is was a classroom that would be caring, co-operating and quiet. The other thing that was necessary was to equip the children with the vocabulary necessary for resolution of conflict and differing opinions and so into the classroom came the words of decision, agree/disagree, negotiate, appropriate, acceptable, interfering, disturbing, put-down, co-operate, right, responsibility.

Step 2 . The shift from individual work to a co-operating group
The children did a lot of partner work and activities and then the group size was increased to 3. At this stage it was simply to get the children used to the idea that they were not necessarily always going to work near or with their friend and the the focus was on getting the children "to listen" to the other person/s. When the group became three the next skills became listening actively, taking turns and sharing.

Step 3. Introducing the first co-operative task
The children were assigned randomly to groups (unifix from box). Positive interdependence was achieved through the goal, resources and environment. The focus was on the social skill. Feedback was by way of the group reporting to the class. Reflection was teacher initiated.

Step 4. Practice
As for step 3 but reflection was handled by the children as a whole class.

Step 5. Heterogeneous grouping ,introduction of one role , written evaluation.
Grouping was done randomly but had been structured so that there was a balance of gender, age, grade, academic and social ability. Focus was on the social skill.
At the end of the activity the children were required as a group to assess their performance and to record it on a sheet. They were also required to think about what they could do to improve the situation next time.

Step 6. Practice

Step 7. Increasing the number of roles
Step five required a presenter (someone to report back on the activity). This step saw the introduction of the organiser and the encourager. Focus beginning to change more equal between academic and social skill.

Step 8. Practice

Final Step. Self-forming heterogeneous groups and assignation of roles.

Problems

In the first few sessions I encountered the four most common problems that Johnson and Johnson (1987) refer to in the work of Dishon and O'Leary (1984). These were the problems of

> *passive uninvolvement, active uninvolvement, independence and taking charge (p.131)*

Passive uninvolvement is when children are distracted from the task , not participating, not paying attention, not contributing or showing no enthusiasm . In my classroom this was manifested in behaviours such as swinging on chairs, rolling pencils backwards and forwards along the desk, gazing around the room, sitting at the desk "sort of looking on."
Active uninvolvement occurs when a child is off task talking about anything else but the task, walking around, refusing to contribute or refusing to work with another group member. This problem of active uninvolvement is the one that was dominant.
Independence occurs when a child works alone and ignores the other member's of the group discussion. In the early stages I'd frequently hear "I've finished my bit. Can I go? It's not fair. I've finished my bit."
Taking charge when one child takes over assuming an authoritarian role.
I experienced the whole range of these problems - there was resistance, put-downs, inability to agree, dominance/submissiveness, the pro-individualist approach, the bewilderment that occurs when the members of the group realise the task is only completed when the group has finished.

All these problems require teacher intervention and have to be addressed during the course of the activity and during the evaluation, feedback and reflection time. Strategies have to be discussed by the whole class, modelled and role-played so that the children can equip themselves to deal with the problem when it next arises. Skills have to be practised regularly and evaluated.

Another problem was lack of support from some parents. I can only assume that the childrens' version as to what was going on in the classroom was that it was "not fair" (meaning they couldn't always sit with their friend and could not work on an individual level) and this was being conveyed to parents. The school, as a whole, organised a parent workshop on co-operative learning to explain what co-operative learning was, why it was being used and to explain the benefits of using it as a teaching strategy. The workshop was a turning point. I'd been able to articulate eight reasons why I was using co-operative learning as a teaching strategy. I used it as a method for:

(1) Balancing social skills - especially those related to the composition of the family, and children who had spent considerable time in child-care.
(2) The development of the values of respect for others and the valuing of other people especially for the younger children, the girls and for the children who take longer to develop academic concepts.
(3) Working in a community - This fits with the Studies of Society and the Environment which are underpinned by the values of democratic process and social justices - values which are important for citizenship and effective participation in this society.
(4) Extending the "comfort zone" - working with people who are different - developing tolerance and helping
(5) Addressing the gender - since there was an imbalance in favour of boys who demanded inequitable amounts of the resources and who exhibited more individualistic, competitive and aggressive behaviours.
(6) Demonstrating that in tackling a task "more heads are better than one"
(7) Efficiency of time and thought in undertaking a task and improved content and quality of work
(8) Demonstrating that it is another teaching strategy but its primary importance for me lay in the fact that social skills can be taught.

Evaluation

Implementing the strategy, reflecting on the difficulties and modifying the procedure as well as reading has led me to believe that using the co-operative learning strategy is possible with young children and despite the fact they may be in the pre-operational and /or early concrete stages of cognitive thinking it does not preclude children from learning or being taught to extend the boundary of the self to others. Co-operative learning is a strategy which can result in positive outcomes in terms of changes in and extensions to a child's repertoire of social skills and especially those skills of co-operation and collaboration.
The ability to co-operate and work collaboratively are the fundaments human organisation. We need these social skills to maintain relationships whether they be of a personal nature such as marriages, friendships, families or those related to the wider world of work and community. Johnson & Johnson (1987) state that

> *Teamwork, communication, effective coordination, and divisions of labour characterise most real-life settings. It is time for schools to reflect the reality of adult life...(p.15)*

This, they believe, can be done through the structure of co-operative learning.
In the smaller environment of the classroom the positive effects that have developed from instituting co-operative learning include:

* a decrease in competition
* an improvement in communication skills e.g. listening actively, questioning appropriately, waiting turns
* a marked improvement in tolerance and respect for others points of view.
* the development of respect for others as people with different strengths and personal qualities
* an improvement in self-esteem and willingness to take risks
* a quieter and more productive classroom environment

Conclusion

I have only just begun my venture into co-operative learning. Apparently, it takes six practice sessions to learn a skill and about two years to teach those skills that are essential for collaborative working and for them to become internalised and part of a child's learning repertoire.
In my position of an early childhood educator and having trialed co-operative learning as a teaching strategy I believe it is worthwhile, effective and manageable and the benefits are many. The process should be implemented slowly and may need to be modified slightly for young children. The earlier it begins the better and if it can be sanctioned by the whole school community then it is more likely to succeed.

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